

SPORTS INITIATIVE BRINGS TOGETHER YOUTHS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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WASHINGTON, JUNE 14 -- Thirty football-playing boys and girls from 13 countries are getting a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to experience life and sports in the United States and then attend the World Cup in Germany.

The middle- and secondary-school athletes, ranging from 13 to 18, come from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Bolivia, China, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Uganda and Uzbekistan. They are participating in a 13-day program that will have those meeting U.S. football players (called soccer players in the United States) in Washington and New York City. They will then depart for Frankfurt to see a World Cup game. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/Archive/2006/Jun/12-490420.html>)).

The program is an initiative of the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the U.S. Soccer Foundation, U.S. Soccer Federation and the Major League Soccer (MLS). It is designed to help build international understanding and respect between young people around the world, according to a June 9 press release issued by the U.S. Department of State.

The program "works at the grassroots level to help young players discover success in athletics -- with an emphasis on teamwork, respect, leadership, and conflict resolution -- can translate into the development of life skills and academic achievement," according to the State Department. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/Archive/2006/Jun/12-490420.html>)).

U.S. embassies selected the delegates from their host countries. "They are rising young stars, and some are incredible," said Heide Crossley, a chaperone for the Moroccan delegates.

"For at least half of them, this is the first time that they have ever been on an airplane," said Brooke Spitzer, a program coordinator for the State Department's Office of Citizen Exchanges. "They have told me that 'it wasn't so scary taking off, but it was the landing,' but they all made it through."

For many of these young people, this trip was the first time away from their parents. "We have already experienced some homesickness, but we were prepared for that," Spitzer said.

"Everyone is excited," she said. "The fact that they all play soccer, even though they have different English levels, [brings] them together."

"You can already tell they are bonding," Crossley said.

According to Crossley, the delegates had not played together prior to coming to the United States and are eager to play as a team. For many of the delegates, this is the first time that they will play with an internationally diverse team or against American youths.

The delegates are "psyched and excited" to play against a U.S. youth team, Spitzer said. "Our goal is to show them how sports are done in the United States."

The delegates have a busy schedule in Washington from June 11 to June 16. Events include a meeting with District of Columbia police officers at a "Boys and Girls Club," a workout with U.S. soccer coach Sasho Cirovski and a scrimmage against local teams -- the MPS 90 McLean FC (for male players 16 years of age or younger) and the McLean FC (for female players 16 years of age or younger).

The delegates also will watch U.S. male and female professional sports teams during their visit. In addition, according to Spitzer, "We are going to show [the delegates] how the U.S. integrates sports into our schools."

For some of the delegates, this program will be the first time they see an organized female professional sports team. In many of the delegates' homelands, professional soccer is restricted to male players.

Many of the visiting athletes expressed their admiration for the legendary female soccer star Mia Hamm. A young Indonesian woman said Hamm is her "favorite soccer player."

For more information, see World Cup 2006 (http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/life_and_culture/sports/world_cup.html), the U.S. Embassy in Berlin's World Cup Web site (<http://worldcup2006.usembassy.de/>), and the related article, "United States Set for Start of 2006 World Cup of Football (<http://usinfo.state.gov/eur/Archive/2006/Jun/08-861494.html>)."

For more information on athletics in the United States, see Sports (http://usinfo.state.gov/scv/life_and_culture/sports.html).

(The Washington File is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)

GR/2006